Sarah Loguen Fraser, MD (1850 to 1933): The Fourth African-American Woman Physician

Eric v. d. Luft, PhD, MLS
Syracuse, New York

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this article appeared in the Alumni Journal *of the SUNY/Syracuse Medical Alumni Association, summer 1998.* *The author wishes to thank Katie Salzmann, Donna M. Wells, Carole L. Novick, Colleen Kiefer, Susan Keeter, Barbara Hamilton, and Peter Uva for their help in the preparation of both versions.*

Around 1802 a 7-year-old free African-American girl named Jane McCoy was kidnapped from her home in Ohio along with several other African-American children and sold into slavery in Tennessee. She lost not only her freedom, but even her name. Her master, David Logue, called her only "Cherry." From her teenage years on, he raped her frequently. Their first child, Jermain Logue, was born around 1813. He escaped to Canada when he was about 21, learned to read, added "n" to his surname and "Wesley" as a middle name, established himself in Syracuse in 1841, led the "Jerry Rescue" of a fugitive slave from a Syracuse jail in 1851, and in 1868 was consecrated a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. In Syracuse he was known as "The King of the Underground Railroad," and it is estimated that about 1500 fugitive slaves passed through his home on their way to freedom.[1] He told his amazing and inspirational story in his autobiography, The Rev. J. W. Loguen as a Slave and as a Freeman, published in Syracuse in 1859.[2]

The fifth of the eight children of Rev. Loguen and his wife Caroline was Sarah Marinda Loguen, born on January 29, 1850, at the Loguen home in Syracuse. She was immediately nicknamed "Tinnie," but she never liked the name much, and on the last day of 1900 she announced that for the new century she would answer only to "Sally" or "Aunt Sally" and nothing else.

After Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law in September 1850, Rev. Loguen was in constant danger until the Civil War began. He could usually hide in Upstate New York, but when times got too hot, for example, after the "Jerry Rescue" and after John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, he would hide in Canada. His wife and children lived in terror of ever discussing his whereabouts.

Tinnie was always very close to her father. She graduated from high school the same year he became bishop and thereafter rode his circuit with him, serving as his secretary and studying German in her spare time. When he died suddenly in 1872, she became head of the household, as her mother had already died and her older sister Amelia had already married and moved away.

In the spring of 1873, while at the train station to begin the return trip from visiting family and friends in Washington, DC, she suddenly heard a small boy scream. A heavily loaded wagon had just run over his leg. A crowd gathered but no one tried

 Requests for reprints should be addressed to Eric v. d. Luft, MD, Health Sciences Library, Upstate Medical University, 766 Irving Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13210.

Figure 1. Remodeled carriage factory campus of the Syracuse University College of Medicine, where Sarah Loguen attended medical school from 1875–1876.

to help him. Tinnie was horrified. She alone searched frantically for a doctor. The crowd was astounded at her actions, but still no one offered the boy any comfort. Finally someone carried him away. Her utter shock at the crowd's indifference to the child's agony prompted her to make this solemn vow: "I will never, never see a human being in need of aid again and not be able to help."

On the train going home she resolved to become a physician. Eyes closed, half in a reverie, she murmured, "I will, I will, I am going to be Doctor Sarah Marinda Loguen." She was startled awake by a familiar voice, "You are, are you?" There, by sheer happenstance, sitting opposite her was her family physician, Michael D. Benedict, MD (Yale, 1836). For the rest of the ride to Syracuse the two discussed what it meant to be a physician. Dr. Benedict, recently President of the Onondaga County (New York) Medical Society, promised to help her all he could.

For the next 5 months Tinnie studied diligently under Dr. Benedict's tutelage, and as the result of her hard work and his influence, she had no trouble getting admitted to the Syracuse University College of Medicine that fall (Figure 1). She matriculated October 3, 1873, and the following day the Syracuse newspapers carried the following item: "We understand that Miss Sarah M. Loguen, daughter of the late Bishop J. W. Loguen, has commenced the study of medicine under the tuition of Doctor M. D. Benedict of this city. This is 'woman's rights' in the right direction, and we cordially wish the estimable young lady every success in the pursuit of the profession of her choice."

She wondered where the school got the bodies for dissection. She found out soon enough. One night during the fourth semester of her 3-year program, a medical student recruited four others, including Tinnie, to rob a fresh grave in Oakwood Cemetery. They successfully evaded the watchman once, and dug up the grave, but they all took fright when they opened the coffin and found, not the pauper man they had expected, but a young, beautiful, and apparently affluent woman. They returned her to rest, replaced the lid, and hastily filled in the grave. The clatter of stones and shovels brought the watchman out again, and the five just barely escaped. Tinnie never went on another such excursion.

When Tinnie received her doctorate in medicine in the spring of 1876 (Figure 2), she became probably the fourth African-American woman physician

Figure 2. Sarah Loguen with her Syracuse University College of Medicine class of 1876.

in the nation.[3] The first was Rebecca Lee[4] (New England Female Medical College, 1864),[5] the second was Rebecca J. Cole (Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, 1867),[6] and the third was Susan Smith McKinney Steward (New York Medical College for Women, 1870).[7] There may have been several others in the early 1870s, but even if so, that would not diminish Tinnie's status as a pioneer of both her race and her gender.[8] By 1890, only about 115 African-American women had become doctors.[9] Reaction set in, both from whites and from African-American males. The U.S. Census of 1920 listed only 65 African-American women active in medical practice.[10]

Shortly after her graduation, one of her classmates (the record is not clear which one) proposed marriage to her. He confessed that he had loved her from the start, asserted that his whiteness and her blackness did not matter, and even suggested that a black female physician was a social freak who needed a white male physician alongside her to ensure her professional survival. She declined his proposal, which she in no way had expected, and told him that she had already seen so much suffering among her own people that she could not abandon them by marrying a white man. She told him that her mission was to build strong and healthy black bodies, and so continue her father's work to improve African-American conditions. Nevertheless she offered her suitor her everlasting friendship. He angrily refused her offer, accused her of trifling with his emotions, and within a week left Syracuse to begin medical practice out west. She never heard from him again.

In September 1876, Tinnie (Figure 3) began her internship at Woman's Hospital of Philadelphia.[11] Soon after her arrival there she met a white woman physician from Nashville, Tennessee, just 16 miles

Figure 3. Dr. Sarah Loguen ca. late 1870s or early 1880s.

from Rev. Loguen's birthplace. Everyone said they looked like twin sisters. They were both soon astonished to discover that they were in fact cousins. The white woman was so flustered and embarrassed by this revelation that she resigned.[12]

Tinnie got along well in Philadelphia and made friends easily. Her warm manner endeared her to the children in the wards, who called her "Miss Doc." Besides pediatric and obstetric cases, she also frequently encountered nervous or mental patients on her rounds. One such patient, a Russian émigré, was especially agitated and irritable, and would pass her time embroidering bright, bold colors on black silk. Tinnie recalled the soothing effect that soft pastel colors often had upon her while she was studying, and decided to try an experiment. She took away this patient's bright silk threads, substituted pastel yarns, and taught her to knit. The calming effect on the patient was remarkable. Within a few months she had almost all the nervous patients knitting with pale yarn and feeling more relaxed as a result. Nowadays the psychology of color is a well-established fact, but in the 1870s it had barely reached the stage of theory, and was mostly trial and error.

In the fall of 1878, Tinnie moved to Boston to fill a 6-month vacancy in an internship at the New England Hospital for Women and Children. In the summer of 1879, she went to Washington to live

with her sister Amelia and their Aunt Tin. Amelia's husband was Lewis Douglass, son of Frederick Douglass, who had been fast friends with Rev. Loguen during the Underground Railroad days. Tinnie opened an office for private medical practice in a room on 13th Street, NW, and Frederick Douglass personally nailed up her shingle.[13]

Another of Frederick Douglass's sons, Charles, served after 1875 as the American Consul in Puerto Plata, Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic), and there made the acquaintance of Charles Alexander Fraser, a pharmacist. While Frederick was visiting his son in Puerto Plata in the summer of 1876, word came to him that Sarah had received her medical degree. At about the same time, Charles Fraser was making plans to visit the northeastern United States. Frederick gave him letters of introduction to both the Douglass and the Loguen families and told him to be sure to meet Doctor Sarah Loguen.

Charles Fraser and Sarah Loguen began a correspondence in 1877 that culminated in her receiving a letter from him in June 1881 asking her to marry him. All the Douglasses advised her to accept. She did, and they were married in Syracuse on September 19, 1882. They lived in Puerto Plata, where Fraser owned a drugstore. Frederick Douglass wrote to her in Santo Domingo from Washington on October 27, 1882: "Tell Mr. Fraser that while I would have been glad to have you here as long as I am in the land of the living, that I do not blame him a bit for taking you away."

Tinnie quickly learned Spanish and in the spring of 1883 was certified to practice medicine in Santo Domingo, though by law her patients were limited to women and children. She was the first woman physician in that country. The family prospered, and enjoyed the company of political friends in high places, such as President Ulises Heureaux and General Gregorio Luperón.

She gave birth to her daughter, Gregoria Alejandrina Fraser, on December 23, 1883. No doctor could be found, and she was attended only by a native midwife using traditional methods. Tinnie was appalled and frightened by the primitive obstetrical procedures that were about to be inflicted upon her, so she countered by dictating the midwife's actions until her labor pains became so severe that she lost consciousness. When she awoke she had a healthy child, but her reproductive organs had been so damaged that she was never able to have another baby.

Figure 4. Dr. Sarah Loguen ca. late 1880s or early 1890s.

On September 28, 1894, Charles Fraser, 10 years Tinnie's senior, suffered a stroke and died 2 days later. Tinnie agonized that the childhood of her daughter (whom she called "Doe") had so suddenly ended. Tinnie gave up her practice in order to manage the drugstore. Then, mostly for the sake of Doe's education, she gradually moved back to Washington between Thanksgiving 1896 and May 1897. She traveled widely in both America and Europe, and, dissatisfied with Doe's progress in American schools, enrolled her in a boarding school in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France. As the century came to a close mother and daughter were dividing their time between Paris and Washington, living on investments from the drugstore profits (Figure 4).

In 1901 Sally (as she was then known) moved back to Syracuse and bought a house on Westcott Street, with the intention of enrolling Doe in the fine arts program at Syracuse University that fall. Doe attended Syracuse University sporadically from 1901 to 1906, listing her home as Puerto Plata, Santo Domingo.

In 1907 Sally moved back to Washington and practiced medicine occasionally. As a private practitioner she was successful, but when she got involved with institutions she was sometimes tricked and exploited. For example, in 1908 the Blue Plains (Maryland) Industrial School for Boys hired her as Resident Physician with private quarters and an office, but when she arrived there she was housed in a cottage with 14 boys and a girl. She and the girl were expected to be maids, cooks, and laundresses for the boys. As soon as Doe discovered what was going

on, she went to rescue her mother: "She was appointed Resident Physician, not Cottage Matron. I am taking her away today. Here is her resignation," she angrily announced to the superintendent. The superintendent, equally angry, told Doe that the only way her mother could break her employment contract without being sued in federal court was to die. "Well, consider her dead," Doe replied, and took Sally away. They had no further trouble from Blue Plains. A few years later, when Sally was practicing 2 days a week at a women's clinic in Washington, she experienced the white women physicians taking credit for the work that the black women physicians had done, and subsequently destroying the case histories that the black women physicians had kept.[14]

In 1911 she bought a house at 2019 13th Street, NW, where she lived the rest of her life. Doe soon moved in with her and the two were exceedingly happy together. When Doe married John Goins in 1917, he moved in with them and lived there until he died in 1930. Sally was very fond of him.

In the 1920s Sally developed kidney disease and memory loss, probably Alzheimer's. After 1928 she no longer remembered familiar faces and often forgot who she was talking to. She required Doe's constant care. But besides these ailments, her waning years also brought her comfort and recognition. For example, in June 1926, on the 50th anniversary of her graduation from medical school, she was the guest of honor at the Howard University Alumni Dinner.

She died peacefully at home in her daughter's arms on April 9, 1933, and was buried in Lincoln Cemetery in Washington. When word of her death reached Puerto Plata, the flags there were ordered flown at half-mast for 9 days.

Doe eventually became an accomplished pianist and music teacher, as well as her mother's biographer. Most of the material for this article comes from Gregoria Fraser Goins' book-length typescript biography of Sarah Loguen Fraser, "Miss Doc," contained in Box 36-4, Folders 51 to 52, of the Goins Papers in the Manuscript Division of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; from other documents and correspondence in the Goins papers; and from the Syracuse University College of Medicine materials in the archives of the State University of New York (SUNY) Upstate Medical University. If "Miss Doc" were to be edited and published as a book, it would be a great benefit to African-American history, women's history, and medical history alike.

The Black History Month celebrations in February 2000 at Sarah Loguen Fraser's alma mater, now called the SUNY Upstate Medical University, were dedicated to her in honor of the 150th anniversary of her birth.

REFERENCES

1. Moldow G. *Women Doctors in Gilded Age Washington.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press; 1987:20.
2. Logue J. *The Rev. J. W. Loguen as a Slave and as a Freeman.* 1859.
3. Epps CH, Johnson DG, Vaughan AL. Black medical pioneers: African-American 'firsts' in academic and organized medicine. *J Natl Med Assoc.* 1993;85:636.
4. Morais HM. *The History of the Negro in Medicine.* New York: Publishers Company; 1970:43.
5. Epps CH, Johnson DG, Vaughan AL. *African-American Medical Pioneers.* Rockville, MD: Betz; 1994:24,147.
6. Thompson LE. Two strikes: the role of black women in medicine before 1920. *Pharos* 1995;58:12.
7. Alexander LL. Susan Smith McKinney, M.D., 1847–1918: first Afro-American woman physician in New York state. *J Natl Med Assoc.* 1975;67:173–175.
8. Hine DC. Co-laborers in the work of the Lord: nineteenth-century black women physicians. In: Abram RJ, ed. *Send Us a Lady Physician: Women Doctors in America, 1835–1920.* New York: W.W. Norton; 1985:107–120.
9. Blount M. Surpassing obstacles: black women in medicine. *J Amer Med Womens Assoc.* 1984;39:192.
10. Goodwin NJ. The black woman physician. *N Y State J Med.* 1985;85:145.
11. Moldow G. *Women Doctors in Gilded Age Washington.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press; 1987:119.
12. Moldow G. *Women Doctors in Gilded Age Washington.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press; 1987:131.
13. Ibid. pp. 13,18,21.
14. Ibid. pp. 88.